

Organizing Activities at the Building Level

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OBJECTIVES

Through organizing mock election activities at the building level, you can expect to:

1. plan mock election activities in schools.
2. encourage informed participation in the democratic process among students, parents, educators, and community members.
3. develop students' critical interpersonal skills, including speaking, listening, and the ability to be part of a team.
4. develop students' effective information assessing and processing skills, including the use of new technology.
5. enable students to acquire the writing skills that permit effective communication.
6. enable students to increase knowledge of American history and government necessary to function in a democratic society and an understanding of the issues surrounding patriotism.

METHODS

The following suggestions are intended to start you thinking and help you initiate discussions with your colleagues about organizing mock election activities in your building. Take what you need from these suggestions and leave the rest! The responsibilities of a school coordinator include the following:

1. Inform your school about the mock election.
2. Help determine which activities your school will hold.
3. Gather support for your activities.
4. Organize participation and activity implementation.
5. Involve parents.
6. Involve community members.
7. Involve public officials.
8. Involve local media.
9. Keep records.
10. Stay in touch with your State or District Coordinator.

11. Collect and tally your school's vote and call it in to your state "Election Headquarters" on mock election night.
12. Evaluate your school's mock election project and share your evaluation with the National Student/Parent Mock Election.
13. Apply for your award(s).

1. Inform your school about the mock election.

As a school coordinator, it is your job to inform everyone at your school about the mock election and mock election activities. This includes the principal, students, all teachers (not only social studies or civics teachers), school staff, and others. Everyone can contribute something to your project so be sure to include the entire school. For example, the food service staff might prepare refreshments for a mock election activity, or the shop class might build lecterns or stages for mock election quiz bowl competitions or speeches. The more people you involve, the more resources you will have to draw upon and the greater the experience for everyone.

It is also important to inform potential participants about the mock election as early as possible. You need time to disseminate mock election information and teachers need time to incorporate mock election activities into their lesson plans.

Be sure that your mock election materials include background information about the program as well as information about the benefits of mock election activities.

2. Help determine which activities your school will hold.

These are some examples of schoolwide mock election activities:

★ Bells Across America

On September 17, 1789, the United States of America ratified the Constitution and "since 1955 Presidents have proclaimed Constitution Week to remind all Americans that the Constitution is an important part of our daily lives." (Bicentennial Commission advertisement for Constitution Week 1991.) When the Constitution was signed, Americans in all 13 states rang bells to commemorate the event and have been doing so ever since. Because the republic is founded upon free elections, it is very fitting that teachers use Constitution Week as a lead-in to mock election activities.

During Constitution Week, students at Crockett High School conducted "Bells Across America" bell-ringing ceremonies featuring recitations of the preamble to the Constitution and other appropriate passages. Groups, with the prearranged permission of other teachers, went from classroom to classroom carrying the message of America's Constitutional birthday. The bell-ringing ceremony might also be conducted in a common area such as a courtyard or lunch room. Another school held a press conference and had their state representative lead the bell-ringing ceremonies after students explained the significance of the event.

All types of bells work well with this activity, including small, round Christmas bells and brass bells. Ask students to bring their own bells and be sure to have a few spares on hand for students who forget to bring theirs.

"Bells Across America" can even be conducted with one bell by passing it around the class, ringing it before and after each student recites a line from the preamble, and passing it after each line is read. Explanations in the students' own words of the meaning of these passages might be interspersed and bell ringing done for each explanation.

★ **Constitutional Signing Reenactment**

Another exercise for Constitution Week is a Constitution signing in which, on a blank page, students act out the signing of the document in 1787. The Constitution can also be decorated as a group or art class project. Consider preparing window or wall displays of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the founding fathers, perhaps with an emphasis of those parts of the document that refer to voting and voting rights.

★ **Displays**

Posters and bulletin boards in or out of the classroom can be used in various ways with an upcoming election. Using stick pins or map pins and colored string, candidates can be tracked on a large map as they campaign about the country trying to get their message out. Cartoons, articles about the candidates and the issues, and campaign materials (posters, literature, bumper stickers, buttons) can be displayed. Campaign materials should be obtained from a candidate or party headquarters. Information about the candidates and issues is also available on the mock election's Internet page located at www.mockelection.org.

★ **An Internet Home Page**

Create a Home Page for your school on the Internet and use it to disseminate information that will be helpful to mock election participants. For example, what are the voter registration requirements for your state? How can absentee ballots be secured? What position on funding education do the candidates for Congress in your district take? Use the Internet to find the information you need and to share that information with others (see the attached list of resources). Use E-mail to share ideas with other schools participating in the mock election. Get in touch with American schools overseas who are participating and exchange experiences and ideas. The only limits are the limits of your imagination.

★ **Mini forums**

Invite all the candidates in one race to come to your school and debate the issues, or

hold a "town meeting" in which an issue of local concern is discussed. (See Chapters 7 and 8 for more information on this topic.)

★ **Newspaper journals**

One of the most useful tools for engaging students with election issues is keeping a newspaper clipping journal in which students are, on a daily basis, required to find, clip, and paste articles, cartoons, or ads about the election, the candidates, and the issues. These are turned in to teachers periodically for grading. (See Chapter 5 for more ways to use newspapers in the classroom.)

★ **Political rallies**

Organize a political rally at your school. Invite candidates, or stand-ins for candidates, to come and campaign, distribute materials, and persuade voters to choose them on Election Day. Dress up your rally with raps, marching bands, balloon releases, or cheering squads with special cheers for their candidates.

★ **Radio shows**

Consider creating a radio series to educate the community in preparation for the elections. One elementary school in Texas created a "Presidential Minutes" series that was not only broadcast by their local radio station but also won a \$5,000 contribution to the school. You can broadcast your series at the school during homeroom periods if the administration agrees.

★ **Role-playing** You may wish to divide the class into political parties. Each group can write and produce its own video and/or radio commercials using camcorders and/or audio cassettes which can be played to other classes or the public. In addition to commercials, the groups can produce their own bumper stickers, T-shirts, road and yard signs, campaign buttons and advertising displays on walls, bulletin boards, and corrugated board. Students can also research advertising rates, plan campaign budgets, and file financial expenditure reports. (For other ideas see the list of classroom activities in Chapter 15.)

3. Gather support for your activities.

Once you have distributed information throughout the school, schedule a schoolwide meeting or a portion of a faculty meeting. To prepare yourself for this meeting, bring copies of mock election information to distribute as well as suggestions for school activities and how they might be implemented. Remember that the mock election is a multidiscipline project. Be prepared with a list of the many ways English teachers can help (from speeches and debates to readings on the foundations of democracy, and essay contests); math teachers can help (counting votes, mathematically predicting possible winners, analyzing federal, state, and local budgets); art teachers can help (posters, signs, school decorations, costumes); science teachers can help (analyzing environmental issues, the impact of new technology, the worldwide availability of natural resources); and music teachers can help (marching bands, patriotic songs, original compositions—perhaps a contest to write a song about “get out and vote”). Don’t be bashful about recruiting teachers’ families—the mock election can be a family activity for faculty as well as students! You may want to consider a preliminary meeting with a group of supportive teachers. Contact your State Coordinator for help—or your District Coordinator if your school district has one.

4. Organize participation and activity implementation.

With the principal and perhaps a committee of supportive teachers, decide how students will participate in mock election activities. Will all classes participate or will activities be implemented only through Government and Civics classes? Will mock election activities take place throughout the semester or just before the elections? What locations will you use? What dates will you set aside? See the list of possible schoolwide activities at the end of this guide. Distribute information, ballots, recommended activities, and resource materials to teachers.

5. Involve parents.

Another goal of the mock election is to involve parents in the education of their children. When circulating information about the mock election, be sure your materials reach parents. Consider sending letters or newsletters home with students, discussing the mock election at Parent-Teacher Association meetings as well as in individual teacher/parent meetings. Inform parents about your plans and ask for their help and suggestions. Many parents will contribute not only resources but also ideas that can enhance your activities.

In addition to reinforcing the lessons that students learn in school, parents can offer a ready and willing resource. They can be active (and public) supporters of your project or work to recruit community members that will publicly support your project. They can volunteer to help shuttle students to and from mock election activities or brainstorm ways community and/or government organizations can shuttle students (e.g., a bus to take students to the campaign headquarters of political candidates). Parents can help decorate facilities for mock election activities or solicit local businesses for decorations. The options are endless! You might consider asking parents to form a committee that offers students suggestions and help with planning and carrying out their projects, that brainstorms creative suggestions to help teachers and students accomplish their goals, or that simply makes themselves available for whatever is needed.

6. Involve community members.

Newspaper in Education (NIE) is a nationwide program that provides excellent teaching materials and workshops and is sponsored by a major newspaper in many communities. The NIE Coordinator often publishes a section or page that features student comments, work and projects as well as a solicitation for student input including contests with significant prizes for winners. Many NIE Coordinators are already working with the mock election. If yours is not yet doing so, put them in touch with the National Student/Parent Mock Election so they can learn about the free materials available to them. If your paper does not have a local coordinator, check the newspaper of a larger nearby

town or city. (See Chapter 5 for more information on working with an NIE program.)

The League of Women Voters can also be very helpful. They have sponsored mock election events and activities in the past and offered invaluable resources such as activity volunteers, guidance in organizing voter turnout campaigns, classroom speakers, election information, and more. In many cities, the League of Women Voters publishes a free election voter's guide featuring issues, candidate particulars, and candidate position commentaries. Call your local chapter of the League of Women Voters for a class set of this publication. At Crockett High School, senior economics students distributed League of Women Voters guides to faculty members with their focus issues highlighted as a part of a class project on veteran's awareness vis-à-vis upcoming state constitutional amendments.

Other organizations such as local businesses, community service groups, professional organizations, and youth groups can provide a plethora of resources. Students or their parents may have contacts at these organizations and may be able to help you set up meetings to discuss potential partnerships or collaborations. Community organizations can provide any number of resources from awards for mock election essay contests to T-shirts for quiz team competitions to volunteer speakers. (See Chapter 12 for more information on this topic.)

7. Involve public officials.

Get to know the officials responsible for registering voters and conducting elections. Local election officials often work through schools, particularly high schools, on voter education programs, and voter registration. Ask officials to come to your school to explain voter registration procedures and the elections process. In Travis County Texas (Austin), the tax collector (in the south, tax collectors collected the poll tax— now outlawed—and thus are now responsible for voter registration) and the county clerk have active on-going programs to register voters and get voters to the polls. The program includes designating senior social studies teachers as deputy voter registrars, providing classroom instructions for voter registration, and conducting an extensive mock election program using actual ballots and equipment with safeguards that prevent any mixing of the mock

election ballots with the actual ballots, both of which are counted electronically. (Contact the League of Women Voters if you are uncertain about who your local election officials are.)

Elected officials of all types are potential speakers on election issues. They, after all, are the ones elected and have a good grasp of the procedure particularly from a political angle. A popular or powerful elected official such as your congress person is not as remote as he or she may seem. Perhaps he or she is looking for a grass roots opportunity to meet his or her constituency. If you are thinking about having a state/federal official visit, you may want to put several classes or the whole school together in a project. Don't overlook parents as a resource in this area. Some parent of some student may be able to persuade an important official to come to your school.

8. Involve local media.

The National Student/Parent mock election grew out of the Parent Participation TV Workshop Project, selected as one of the 11 outstanding examples for building public confidence in the schools. You will receive only positive coverage for mock election activities and cement the school's relations with the community. (See Chapter 4: Involving Print and Electronic Media.)

9. Keep records.

Keep a record of the types of mock election activities that are being implemented as well as how many students are participating at each grade level.

10. Stay in touch with your State or District Coordinator.

It is important that you remain in close touch with your State or District Coordinator (if your district has one). They will be sending you new and updated resource materials, as well as informing you about other mock election activities that are taking place and how the mock election votes from your state will be collected. Likewise, you should send your State or District Coordinator periodic updates about your activities.

11. Select and train student election officials to collect and tally your school's vote and call it in to your district or state "Election Headquarters" on mock election night.

As school coordinator you will receive the candidate's ballots from your State or District Coordinator. (Issues ballots are part of the issues guide.)

If your school does not plan to use online voting, you need to duplicate and distribute mock election ballots to all participating teachers (to pass out to their students) prior to mock election day. With participating teachers, you can select and train student election officials to collect and tally the results of your school's mock election day. Once all students have voted, you will be responsible for calling your school's votes in to your State or District Mock Election Headquarters so that they can be forwarded to the National Mock Election Headquarters on November 2, 2000. Note: It is very important that all teachers in your school know that they submit their class totals to you and do not overwhelm the state "Election Headquarters" with more than one call from a school on mock election night. An alternative possibility this year will be voting online at mockelection2000.net.

12. Evaluate your school's mock election project.

If you have read Chapter 2, "Evaluating Mock Election Activities," you will already have involved students in evaluating your school's success. If the faculty wishes to do an independent evaluation as well, go to it!

Above all, please remember to share the results of your evaluation(s) with the National Student/Parent Mock Election committee. You may use the official evaluation form (see page vii), or any other approach you wish to let us know what happened, what worked well for you, what needs improvement, and what we can do to help you better next time.

13. Apply for your award(s).

The NASSP/John Herklotz Award (the National Association of Secondary School Principals) is given for "outstanding contributions in teaching democracy" and is for schoolwide mock election projects. The NASC/Ruth Hollander Award (the National Association of Student Councils) is given for "outstanding leadership in democratic participation" and is for student-led projects. If you believe your school's project was outstanding, be sure to complete the awards application (see Appendix 1) and send it in to us!

One of the purposes of the mock election is to ensure the continuation of democracy as today's students become our future leaders. In order for students to learn how to preserve and improve Constitutional government, they must understand the necessary conditions for its existence and the relationship between citizens, the Constitution and the government. (See the new standards, Section I.)

The new standards suggest that students gain a deeper understanding of the political process in America (at all levels: national, state, and local), how it evolved, and the implications of such documents as the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. The standards further state that students should understand the major responsibilities of their local government. See the new standards, Section III.